**Vatican’s New Document Welcomes ‘Marriage Catechumenate’**

The Holy See’s 97-page instruction endorsed by Pope Francis outlines how marriage formation is to be based on the baptismal catechumenate, but some U.S. dioceses and parishes are already well on their way.



Bernice and Gerardo Robledo say they have been blessed by the formation they received prior to receiving the sacrament of matrimony following their civil marriage. (photo: Courtesy of the Robledos)

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When Gerardo and Bernice Robledo first considered the sacrament of matrimony almost 10 years ago, the couple opted for a civil marriage instead.

While well-meaning family members pressured them to get married in the Catholic Church, the couple said, “No.” They were not practicing their faith at the time, and, deep down, they knew they would be getting a sacrament for all the wrong reasons. “Spiritually, we just weren’t ready,” Gerardo told the Register.

Years later, as members of their Athens, Texas, parish community hearing a homily on God’s mercy, the Robledos felt inspired to at last receive the sacrament of matrimony. They had finally become disposed to let its sacramental grace work in their lives.

The couple was eager to get sacramentally married right away. And their parish did them a favor by telling them they would receive the sacrament in six months — after a period of preparation called “marriage catechumenate.”

“It really helped us,” Bernice said. “God wanted us to do it for the right reason.” The six-month journey helped them work through some unresolved pain in their relationship, discover new things about each other, and deepen their love before their wedding at their parish in June 2020.  “At that point, I felt like, ‘Hey, we’re really prepared to do this,’” she said. “And we were doing it for the right reason.”

On June 15, the [Vatican announced](http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/news/amorislaetitia/-nuovi-percorsi-per-la-preparazione-al-sacramento-del-matrimonio.html) that the Pope wanted the Catholic Church to fundamentally reorient itself on marriage formation as a “catechumenal itinerary toward matrimonial life.”

The 97-page document is for now published in Italian and Spanish, and it provides general principles for dioceses to pilot a marriage catechumenate.

**Three Parts**

Broadly sketched out, the Vatican envisions a [catechumenate for marriage with three parts](https://www.ncregister.com/cna/should-the-church-require-a-year-of-marriage-prep-catholic-formators-weigh-in). It suggested a “proximate preparation” that takes place over the course of a year, depending on the couple’s experience of faith and involvement in the life of the Church, followed by an immediate preparation in the months before the wedding. This could include a [betrothal rite](https://www.ncregister.com/features/what-is-the-rite-of-betrothal), among other signs, leading up to receiving the sacrament of matrimony. Then, the third part would be marriage “mystagogy,” a post-wedding formation phase involving at least two to three years of accompanying couples through their first steps of married life.

The timelines appear to be more guidelines than requirements. Pope Francis emphasized in his introduction to the “Catechumenal Itinerary” that marriage formation needs to be like “a dress that must be ‘tailor-made’ for the people who will wear it.”

“These are, in fact, guidelines that ask to be transposed, adapted and put into practice in the concrete social, cultural and ecclesial situations in which each particular Church finds itself living,” the Pope said in the introduction.

A marriage catechumenate was[discussed](https://www.ncregister.com/features/is-marriage-catechumenate-the-church-s-missing-antidote-for-the-marriage-crisis) at the 1980 Synod on the Family and proposed by St. John Paul II in his 1981 document on the role of the Christian family in the modern world, *[Familiaris Consortio](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html).* However, the idea was not sustained, and the Church settled into catechesis-driven, classroom-style pre-Cana instead.

But the [2015 Synod on the Family](https://www.ncregister.com/news/will-the-synod-replace-pre-cana-with-marriage-catechumenate) saw marriage catechumenate proposed again, and some dioceses and parishes began to take the initiative to pilot it. While Pope Francis did not address marriage catechumenate directly in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the Holy Father nevertheless provoked a [sustained campaign for marriage catechumenate](https://www.ncregister.com/features/is-marriage-catechumenate-the-church-s-missing-antidote-for-the-marriage-crisis) in the Church.

The Vatican’s plan for the marriage catechumenate also envisions making use of a “rite of betrothal” to signify the couple’s decision to marry and which could mark the final preparatory stage before receiving the sacrament.

Drew Hall, a parishioner at Mount Calvary Catholic Church in Baltimore, told the Register that he and his wife, Natalie, when they were engaged, were inspired by the example of friends to make use of a “betrothal rite” as a public sign of their love and commitment to marry each other in the Church.

“It was really edifying because it’s kind of putting a stamp on your engagement,” he said. The betrothal rite, he said, really helped make clear their intention to marry each other with God’s blessing and as “part of the church community,” and included a blessing of the engagement ring. Their betrothal was in July 2021; they were married in January 2022.

“It was really wonderful,” he said of the betrothal. “We had a little reception downstairs afterwards, and everyone kept saying to us, ‘This so beautiful. Such a great idea. We never heard of this before.’ So it was kind of an evangelization opportunity, as well.”

**Adapting to the Challenge**

Orienting the Church toward a marriage catechumenate comes at a time when sacramental marriages have declined 70% in the U.S. alone since 1969.

According to data from Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), the annual number of attempted sacramental marriages has dropped from 426,300 (in 1969) to under 148,000 (in 2014), while the self-identified U.S. Catholic population overall grew by 21 million, from 54.1 million to 75.4 million, over the same period.

“The Church, universally and in the United States, has needed a full reform because of the state of marriage today,” Julia Dezelski, associate director of the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told the Register.

Dezelski pointed out that the Church in the U.S. has a “plethora of marriage preparation,” from catechetical curricula to marital inventories. However, Dezelski said the marriage catechumenate is seeking to address missing elements, particularly accompaniment, as too many Catholic marriages end up in divorce, remarriage or the annulment process.

While the Catholic population has a reduced rate of divorce compared to the general population, according to 2015 Pew research, 25% of Catholics are divorced, with 9% having remarried; while 30% of the general population have divorced, with 13% having remarried.

Dezelski said the catechumenate comes from an ancient Christian practice where adult converts had to come to know Jesus Christ before they were baptized through a “very thorough” process of formation. She said the Pope is drawing from that example for sacramental marriage.

“I think that we’re definitely headed in the right direction, with this kind of guidance from the Vatican, on how to restart and reform our marriage preparation,” she said. “From what I know of the marriage and family life directors across the country at the diocesan levels, I think there will be a lot of support.”

**Rooting Married Couples in the Church**

The United States already has dioceses and parishes piloting the formation process for a marriage catechumenate.

In the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, where the Robledos live, the couple used the catechumenal process of the [Witness to Lovemarriage ministry](https://witnesstolove.org/), which involves a virtues-based preparation where couples are accompanied by a practicing Catholic mentor couple of their choosing. The “[Witness to Love](https://www.ncregister.com/news/witness-to-love-answer-to-a-synod-s-prayer-for-marriage-formation)”[catechumenal preparation](https://www.ncregister.com/news/witness-to-love-answer-to-a-synod-s-prayer-for-marriage-formation) and [*Be Light*mystagogy](https://witnesstolove.org/belight/) are used in 400 parishes in dioceses and archdioceses across the U.S.

The Robledos found their mentor couple attending a parish retreat and connected with them because they had children and could relate to their experiences. “It was amazing just to meet with our mentors,” Bernice said. “Their experience had a deep impact on us.”

Marriage catechumenate is aimed at forming couples for “good, holy Catholic marriages” and requires “walking with couples to the wedding day and beyond,” explained Deanna Johnston, director of family life for the [St. Philip Institute of Catechesis and Evangelization](https://stphilipinstitute.org/)for the Diocese of Tyler.

She said the marriage catechumenate in Tyler involves nine to 12 months of formation and then invites couples into formation events aimed at the first five years after the wedding day, and even beyond.

“It can’t be that we’re putting couples into a classroom,” she said. “We can’t do that anymore.”

Johnston said the marriage catechumenate model allows the Church to be “more intentional” with that time with couples, and it integrates them deeper into the life of the Church. The Robledos attend Mass weekly, where Bernice is now a lector, and they involve themselves in parish activities. Johnston said the marriage catechumenate recognizes that even well-formed Catholics need formation for the sacrament.

“Even if they’ve been well-formed in the Church’s teaching, they’ve never been married before,” she said.

**Typical Seekers Both Civilly Married and Engaged**

The Vatican’s push for marriage catechumenate is also providing dioceses an opportunity to recognize that the typical Catholic couple seeking the sacrament of matrimony could either be engaged and never married, or civilly married.

Johnston said Tyler diocesan officials estimate half of the 310 weddings in 2021 involved civilly married couples receiving the sacrament of matrimony (also referred to in Church law as “convalidation”). Johnston said Hispanic couples were more likely to be already civilly married when they came for the sacrament. The English-speaking “Anglo” Catholics, she added, were more likely to be never married when seeking the sacrament of matrimony, but, lately, she noted, a rising number are civilly married.

According to 2015 Pew Research, one out of three Catholics were civilly married instead of married in the Church.  “In many of the parishes, they are either *only*doing convalidations or half of the weddings were convalidations,” she said.

But Johnston stressed that civilly-married Catholics were far more motivated than the engaged to embrace the sacrament of matrimony and be sacramentally prepared for it.

“With engaged couples I tend to see more of a ‘I’m doing this because I have to’ kind of attitude, though there are couples who genuinely desire the sacrament because they understand that it is an important part of living a marriage with Christ at the center,” she said. “With civilly-married couples, I pretty consistently see that they are approaching the sacrament of matrimony because of an encounter, or a moment of conversion. They express in one way or another that they recognize that there is something that is missing in their marriage.”

**Building the Catechumenate**

Developing a marriage catechumenate will not be an overnight process. In the Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, Richard Budd, the diocese’s director of family life, told the Register the diocesespent four to five years developing its marriage catechumenate, piloting it in parishes for 18 months before officially launching in 2020.

The diocese’s marriage catechumenate model has four stages modeled after the baptismal catechumenate: “Evangelization, Catechesis, Purification and Enlightenment, and Mystagogy.” The model is flexible for the catechumenal journey, giving pastors the discretion to have the couple complete the journey in six months, or longer, if needed, to fully prepare for the sacrament.

When it comes to the length of the marriage catechumenate, Budd explained that couples are on board with a tailored approach to marriage formation, so long as they know the Church is not wasting their time. He pointed out that most couples are not looking to get married overnight, but have spent one to two years planning for their wedding. One reason couples contact parishes after choosing their venues is because they’re told not to contact the parish until six months before the wedding.

“We now tell parishes to have couples contact them right away,” he said.

Couples then can set a date only after completing the premarital inventory, such as [FOCCUS](https://www.foccusinc.com/)or [PREPARE/ENRICH](https://www.prepare-enrich.com/), which helps flag strengths, areas for growth or red flags in the couple’s relationship. They then meet with the priest or deacon, who can propose a tailor-made approach for them to have a solid foundation for a successful marriage.

That may be a minimum of six months, or nine months, or more if needed. The mentor couples they choose accompany them through the process, while parishes can use a variety of catechetical materials to meet the diocesan preparation requirements.

Budd said the diocese’s approach recognizes that the Church cannot expect the grace of matrimony to accomplish its work in the couples unless they are receptive to having Jesus Christ enter into their marriage with this sacrament.

“If they don’t know who Christ is, they won’t know how to grow in that grace,” he said.

**Marriage Mystagogy**

Father Matthew DeGance, parochial administrator at St. Helen Catholic Church in Vero Beach, Florida, who also uses the “Witness to Love”catechumenal marital formation at his parish, said the mentor couples chosen by the couple are key collaborators in providing the time, attention and witness to the couple seeking the sacrament of matrimony that is just not possible for the clergy to provide on their own.

“From what I’m seeing, it’s working across the board,” the priest said, including across socioeconomic, ethnic and racial lines in the parishes he has served. “It’s working with Hispanics; it’s working with Anglos — even with people that I kind of thought were going to check the boxes and nod their heads. They came back to me and said, ‘That was really good. It opened up doors that I wasn’t expecting and lines of communication I wasn’t expecting in any way.’”

Father DeGance said he builds post-marriage formation, or marriage mystagogy, around events that couples want to go to, such as a dinner dance or wine-and-cheese night. The “enrichment exercise,” which may be a “witness talk” or a presentation on conflict resolution, he said, may occupy 15 to 30 minutes of a two and a half hour event. Through these events, the parish can invite couples to go further by connecting into a small group, like one that uses Alpha’s “[The Marriage Course](https://alpha.org/the-marriage-course/).”

“We want to provide these couples opportunities to one meet other couples to see a healthy way of living family life,” the priest said.

Johnston said the Tyler Diocese is applying a similar approach to marriage mystagogy, looking at the first five years, where couples are most vulnerable to marriage failure, and beyond. That can take a variety of options at the parish, deanery or diocesan level: such as “date night” events, where couples can connect with each other and have the Church’s support to “deal with the reality of their lives.”

“We have to connect people to each other,” she said. “It has to come through relationships and building trust.”

Gerardo and Bernice Robledo told the Register they recently came back from a “Water to Wine” date night held by the St. Philip Institute that helped deepen their appreciation of the sacrament and offered fellowship with other married couples.

“That continuing formation, learning more and having fun at the same time, it was really nice to have that,” Bernice said.

“Especially in the world we live in today,” Gerardo added. “If parishes had more stuff like that for couples afterwards, it would help a lot.”

*Editor’s Note: Peter Jesserer Smith is editing a book for Witness to Love. The book is expected to be published around late 2022 or early 2023.*

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